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Church Family Sunday  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
May 14, 2023  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Deuteronomy 21:18-21 and 1 Peter 3:17

It's not my fault. It's really not my fault! But I'm sure that none of you enjoyed those Bible readings today. And why on earth is the title of this reflection NOT "Mother's Day"? And moreover, what is "Church Family Sunday" anyway?

All great questions. And at least one of those questions has a simple answer. What is "Church Family Sunday"? It's a term that I just made up. Because today I want to remind us all of the incredible gift that people in this church can be for each other. We ourselves can choose to be family for each other. But we'll get to that later. And if an early phase of this sermon is a bit dark because of those scripture readings, we will find hope near the end. And that hope will come from the gift of each other.

It's a bit hard to know where to start this story. But I will start with a quote from Apple News this week,

[image: quote below]

"Mother's Day has evolved over the last century as definitions of motherhood have changed to include more people who do not fit into the June Cleaver archetype". And it's not only that the idea of motherhood has changed. The idea of family has changed too.

I want to show you some families. And I wonder which if any - or if all - of these families that you relate to. Which of these families would you want to belong to?

[image: little house on the prairie]

[image: leave it to beaver]

[image: Brady bunch]

[image: home improvements]

[image: family ties]

These images - and our own families - have shaped our understanding of family. My own problem with TV families is that in general they are simply too functional to be realistic. Well that's fine - TV is an escape after all. But as Apple News said, many people

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balk at the “leave it to beaver” image of family today because their own experiences of family are more fractured if not downright dysfunctional.

The fact is that many - if not all - of us do not live in TV-style families. And that complicates how we celebrate things like Mother’s Day in church. Because I do not want to spout platitudes about how wonderful mothers are when I know that for some of us, that is simply not the case. For example, some of us had abusive mothers. And platitudes about how perfect mothers are can be very hard to hear. The United Church actually does not name today as mother’s day. The United Church calls today “Christian Family Sunday”. They call us to broaden our understanding of family, nurturing, caring. And I applaud that broadening. Because the society we live in - the actual society, not the one depicted on TV - needs all the nurturing and caring that we can get (and our society needs all the nurturing and caring that we can give).

So what - exactly - is a “Christian family”? I suppose that is a family that grows up with Christian ideals. But even that is not so simple. Is a Christian family one that follows the Bible? I suppose. But what about those readings this morning. Do any of us live in families like that? Do any of us want to live in families like that?

In case you are watching this sermon later and skipped the readings - in brief summary - we read the disturbing text from Deuteronomy 21 where we are instructed on the proper way to kill our own children if they are disobedient. And the reading from 1 Peter 3 where wives are declared to be subservient to their husbands regardless of how bad the husband’s behaviour is. Really hard texts to hear. Really hard to imagine that that was ever what a Christian family should look like. And I was tempted to NOT read those text today.

But those readings - and I could have selected other biblical texts that promote the same nonsense - do actually contribute to our collective understanding of “Christian Family”. Some of us grew up in households where the father figure did rule the roost. And our texts today were completely embraced by a Mennonite community in Bolivia where the men felt free to physically and sexually assault the women in their own community.

[image: women talking]

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I won't say more about that except to say that that true story of the community in Bolivia is what led to the book "Women Talking". And Sharon is currently leading a discussion group on that very book. And I encourage you all to participate in that discussion group. And perhaps to reflect on what the term "Christian Values" means to you, particularly when we take the time to read all of the Bible, not just the bits that we like.

I said earlier that TV families seem too idealized to be real. That is perhaps what makes them interesting. And of course we all know the rules in TV sitcoms. Every episode has some event that triggers a response. But in most shows, you know that in the very next episode, any lessons learned in the previous episode are completely forgotten. We know the rules.

In any case, I always loved this TV family.

[image: all in the family]

Because the show, "All in the Family" was a depiction of a very imperfect family. And because of all the imperfections, the Bunkers seemed to me to be quite realistic. Growing up I knew a number of families that I thought were quite a lot like the Bunkers. Not as funny of course, because "All in the family" is still a TV show. But families that played out the tension between older and newer modes of thinking. Families that played out the tension between outright racism and tentative inclusion. Families where perhaps one person had the most obvious flaws, but in the end, every member of the family had issues that they were struggling with. In other words, families that were made up of actual human beings.

I could imagine being part of this family. I mean as a fifth character. I don't mean that I identified with any particular character. Although obviously I would be most like either Lionel Jefferson or Michael "meathead" Stivic. But in truth, I'd rather be my own character. But I can imagine being part of the Bunker family.

The Bunkers were not perfect. But they had their opinions and they talked about important issues. They did not shy away from difficult conversations. And along the way they helped each other in times of financial trouble and personal difficulty. Perhaps they disagreed - even fought. But there was love there.

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Of course, I did not grow up in that family. Do you want to see a picture of my actual family growing up?

[image: Addams family]

I'll leave it to you to figure out which character I was. Or which character I still am.

In honour of mother's day I at least want a shorter sermon so that people can go for lunch. So let's get back to the idea of "Church Family Sunday". One of my favourite TV families was not actually a family, technically. But it was a group of people who worked together, lived together, and had a common purpose. They acted like family. And their survival depended on their ability to work and live as family together.

[image: Gilligan's island]

The basis of Gilligan's Island is that a group of strangers are forced together by random chance. They have a common purpose - getting rescued. But since the rescue may take some time, they also put time into living comfortable lives while they wait. So in fact they all share a number of overlapping purposes. Creating decent accommodations, growing adequate food, and even creating their own entertainment while they wait either to be rescued - or for the show to be cancelled.

Yes, the characters were caricatures. The wealthy person who only cared about money. The "egghead" scientist who only cared about his experiments. They were all caricatures. Intentionally so. But that was because - let me tell you a secret - "Gilligan's Island" was not a documentary. But each character brought their own gifts and strengths into the mix. And the family that was formed had a good time. They even crafted some good rescue plans. Always ruined by Gilligan of course. But it was obvious that they cared about each other. They wanted the best for each other. They loved each other. They became family to each other.

[image: church family multigen]

In many ways, church families - at their best - are like the "family" on Gilligan's Island. A church family is a place where people who were once strangers to each other come together by the random process of location. We all bring our own gifts and strengths into the mix. And over time we come to know each other. We come to

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appreciate each other. And we share a common purpose in coming together. Well, we have a number of common purposes. And those purposes all relate to being a community of faith in our time and place.

We learn from each other. We share with each other. We grieve with each other. We bring and are the presence of Christ in our community.

“Church Family” is a gift. Church family is a gift from God. Some assembly required of course. Let us go out of our way this week to celebrate the gift that we are to each other. And here’s a hint. Go up to someone and tell you that you are glad that they are part of this family. You know, like at coffee time.

Happy Mother’s Day.

Amen.